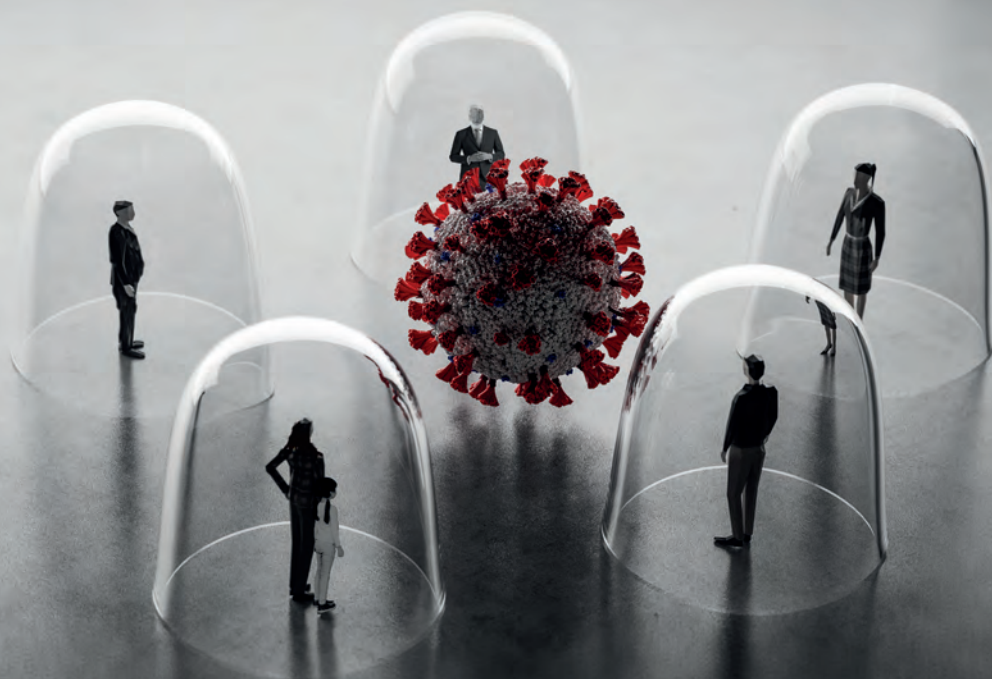


Anna Moskal · Aleksandra Sobarnia
Szymon Pazera · Zuzanna Kopania

THE EUROPEAN UNION IN LIGHT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC —

A FAILURE OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION OR
A CHANCE FOR CLOSER COOPERATION AMONG MEMBER STATES?



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Cracow 2021

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Table of Contents

Preface	7
List of Acronyms and Abbreviations.	13
Timeline of the History of European Integration	15
Anna Moskal	
Introduction	19
Aleksandra Sobarnia	
I. The Historical Development of European Integration	27
1. Early Post-War Period	27
2. The European Communities	30
3. Eurozone	35
4. Project of the European Constitutional Treaty	40
5. The Lisbon Treaty.....	43
6. Summary	47
Anna Moskal	
II. Visions of European Integration	49
1. Early Concepts of European Integration	49
2. Debate on Multi-Speed Europe	52
3. Brexit	56
4. White Paper on the Future of Europe.....	60
5. Four EU Scenarios for Governance in a Post COVID-19 World...	68
6. Summary	72
Szymon Pazera	
III. The Outbreak of the COVID-19 in Europe	75
1. COVID-19	75
2. European Union's Competences and Actions	78

3. European Union versus Disinformation	99
4. Distribution of Vaccines in the EU and Vaccination Certificates	104
5. Summary	112

Zuzanna Kopania

IV. Critical Perspective on the Reactions to the COVID-19 Pandemic in the European Union	113
1. Actions Taken by Member States	113
2. Actions Taken by the European Union.	133
3. Recommendations of Actions Which Should Be Taken to Handle Crises in the European Union	138
4. Summary	146

Anna Moskal

Conclusions.	149
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Bibliography	153
Notes about Authors	171
Summary	173
Streszczenie	175
Index	177

ANNA MOSKAL

Conclusions

The shape and future of the European integration has always been a topic frequently generating numerous heated debates amongst politicians, lawyers and political scientists. The authors view the European integration as a dynamic and evolving process which accelerated in recent years due to the new developments and challenges of a fast-paced, globalised modern world. What started as a purely economic project in the middle of the 20th century, progressively evolved into impressive cooperation in numerous political, economic and legal areas. Although there are no doubts that the European Union is a unique and ambitious international organisation which remarkably contributed to the growth and development of its Member States as well as to a significant improvement of the quality of life of the European citizens, it seems that the initial enthusiasm derived from the creation of the union has burnt out and the Eurosceptic tendencies grew in strength in recent years.

During several decades of its existence, the EU went through various peaks and valleys. The last fifteen years were particularly tough and challenging given that the EU had to face the financial crisis of 2007–2009, the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation and the ensuing hybrid war in Ukraine, the migration crisis, discussions on the democratic character of European integration and Eurosceptic propaganda, and the most recent withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the EU which took place on 31 January 2020. Even though the EU handled each of these crises rather successfully, more and more negative opinions about the EU emerged, especially in the cyber world. This is even more evident due to numerous disinformation campaigns, fake news and anti-EU online propaganda which have been spreading for a few years. There are several reasons for being dissatisfied with the EU, which is accused of being incompetent, undemocratic, bureaucratic, slow in action and inefficient in a time of crisis. To make it worse, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic put to the test the ability of the EU to react quickly and effectively, and exposed the weak points of cooperation and solidarity of its Member States. This made 2020 a real test for the strength of the integrity of the

organisation, as well as of the effectiveness of the EU institutions and the Member States in handling the extremely challenging and life-threatening crisis.

The COVID-19 pandemic made it painfully clear that viruses know no borders and that the Member States were not prepared well enough to prevent the spread of a deadly disease. In fact, the first reactions of the Member States could be characterised as chaotic, inconsistent and uncoordinated. For the first time in the EU history, many Member States univocally decided to close their borders, prohibited mass gatherings and imposed severe lockdowns. Such strict restrictions on rights and freedoms of European citizens during the COVID-19 pandemic were a novelty for many, and cast reasonable doubts on the effectiveness of the EU law and the strength of European integrity. Moreover, the initial nationalistic and egoistic approach of some European countries posed a serious threat to the long-built solidarity between the Member States. Although the first month of the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe undeniably exposed some weaknesses of the EU and its Member States, the later integrative and solidarity-based actions of EU institutions and the Member States eventually prevailed.

In the last 16 months, the EU and its Member States had to face an unprecedented deadly threat which put health and lives of the European citizens at risk. The EU had to deal with unprecedented and severe crisis in an area in which it had limited, supportive competences. Despite this hardship, the EU continuously assisted its Member States by developing initiatives and mechanisms which eventually strengthened cooperation between countries, lifted morals of EU citizens and saved thousands of European lives. What is more, at that time of severe health crisis, the EU had to address anti-EU disinformation campaigns and online propaganda created and spread intensively in spring 2020 by the Russian Federation. Despite numerous fake news on the virus, vaccines and the EU performance, the EU institutions (including the European Commissions, the European Digital Media Observatory, the East StratCom Task Force and the EUvsDisinfo) successfully increased public awareness and helped its citizens to develop resilience to infodemia and online manipulation.

During a time of horrendous health crisis and detrimental cyberattacks, the level of trust that European citizens have in the EU and national governments could be potentially lowered. However, thanks to its quick response and adaptability, the EU managed to keep its positive image. According to the Eurobarometer reports, a significant number of EU citizens express their satisfaction with the measures taken by the EU as well as with the overall level of solidarity of the Member States. What is more, the majority of responders shared a belief that the EU should have more competences in a time of health crisis and other emergency situations. Indeed, this is one of many recommendations which can be drawn from the hard yet extremely valuable lessons learnt by the EU in the first 1,5 years of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Thanks to the adaptability of European institutions to handle severe crises and the impressive level of solidarity between the Member States, the EU seems

to have survived another and perhaps the most threatening to its existence crisis which was caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The historical development of European integration demonstrates that it is an irreversible progress which requires a lot of effort and compromising from the Member States. Although some claimed that the COVID-19 would spell the end of the EU, in the authors' opinion the credibility of the European project has not been damaged. Contrary, the EU institutions and the Member States ultimately seem to respond effectively and successfully to the ongoing COVID-19 crisis. In this turbulent time, it is extremely important to remain cooperative and faithful.

It is certainly not an easy task to predict what the European integration will look like in future. Regardless of which course of action the Member States will choose in the post-COVID-19 era, in order to support and develop a 70-year-long successful cooperation, they have to stand together with a strong sense of unity, integrity and solidarity. As Robert Schuman declared on 9 May 1950, and as the authors quoted at the beginning of this book: "Europe will not be made all at once, or according to a single plan. It will be built through concrete achievements which first create a *de facto* solidarity."

This publication makes a notable contribution to the highly discussed and lively topic of European integration. It includes a brief description of the origins of the European Union, the evolution of the organisation over the last several decades, the changing visions of the future of Europe, the crises that the Member States faced in the past, and finally, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the current and future level of European integration. This publication provides the reader with novel and very detailed data on the performance of the EU and its Member States during the unprecedented global pandemic. It is a must-read for those who search for the most recent information on the shape and level of European integration, the cooperation of the Member States during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as on the level of trust given to the EU by its citizens. Additionally, this book sheds light on the Eurosceptic disinformation and fake news which have arisen in the past few years and which will continue to constitute a very controversial topic for the next few years.



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